Poetics of Praise and Cinematic Encompassment

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-- For John Bernard Bate (1960–2016) --

Pure Tamil, Mass Hero[1]

The nineteenth century saw a transformation of politics and its ethnolinguistic imaginary in the Madras Presidency. Colonial philological research into the relatedness of what became known as the Dravidian language family (Ellis 1816 [1849]; Caldwell 1856; Trautmann 1997, 2006; Mitchell 2009) proved that the south Indian languages—Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, as well as other, so-called tribal languages (Badaga, Toda, etc.)—came from a different genetic stock from the north Indian languages (viz. Indo-Aryan/European)—namely, Sanskrit and its congeners and daughter languages—and that its speakers, as later scholars in particular opined, were of a different ethno-racial and culture-historical population. Toward the final decades of the nineteenth century, Indian scholars such as U. Ve. Swaminatha Iyer (1855–1942) and C. W. Thamotharampillai (1832–1901) collected and anthologized ("discovered"), and thus made publicly available, the poems, epics, and grammars of Tamil antiquity—the so-called Sangam literature (~300 CE) (Shulman 2016:299ff.). Alongside this renaissance, as Sumathi Ramaswamy (1997) has detailed, was a resurgence of Saivism—figured as distinct from north Indian, Aryan, Brahminical Hinduism—as well as, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the non-Brahmin movement, a consortium of elite, upper-caste non-Brahmin Tamils who protested the Brahmin monopoly on colonial positions of power (Pandian 2007).

Into the twentieth century, these different threads came to be articulated and transformed through the so-called Dravidian movement, a

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political project spearheaded by *Periyār* ('the Great One') E. V. Rama-swamy (1879–1973), *Ariñar Aṇṇā* ('The Learned, Older Brother') C. N. Annadurai (1909–1969), and *Kalaiñar* ('The Artist') Mu. Karunanidhi (b. 1924). This political project narrated an autochthonous, egalitarian and sec-ular, ethnolinguistically pure Dravidian/Tamil community (which they represented) that was, and continued to be they inveighed, unjustly dom-inated by an Aryan, Sanskritic, and casteist Brahminical culture (and pol-itical party—viz. the Congress Party) from the north.

With independence in 1947, Annadurai and Karunanidhi—two char-ismatic orators who were also screenwriters for theater and film—broke off from Periyar's iconoclastic Dravida Kazhakam ('Dravidian Feder-ation') in 1949 to form the Dravida Munnetra Kazhakam (DMK; 'Dravi-dian Progress Federation'), a political party aimed at a mass, populist electorate. The DMK was electorally victorious in 1967, rising on the wings of the anti-Hindi protests of 1965 that opposed the central government's imposition of the Hindi language on civil service exams. Dravidianist par-ties have controlled the Secretariat in St. George ever since, and their pop-ulist, ethnolinguistic politics of Tamil language and culture remain hege-monic.

Scholars of the Dravidian movement have pointed to two communi-cative media as central to its emergence and success: public oratory and commercial cinema. I turn to each in turn.

From Stage to Secretariat

John Bernard Bate's 2009 monograph, *Tamil Oratory and the Dravidian Aes-thetic* details the aesthetic of political oratory that became emblematic of the Dravidianist parties, in particular, their use of *sentamil*, a speech register of 'refined', 'beautiful' Tamil in events of public address. "Pure" (that is, denuded of Sanskritic and English words), literary, and littered with antiquated forms, this register indexically invokes a Tamil antiquity, a time imagined to predate contact with Brahminical Hinduism and San-skrit, a time of Tamil kings ruling a Tamil land. *Sentamil* personified, even presenced, *Tamiḻtāy* or 'mother Tamil', a feminized deification of the lang-uage to which Dravidianist orators proclaimed devotion and which they promised to protect (Ramaswamy 1997).

As Bate showed in this book, and in articles on the late nineteenth-century emergence of public political speech in the Madras Presidency (Bate 2004, 2005, 2010, 2012, 2013), while evocative of and drawing on a literary culture and imaginary of Tamil antiquity, *sentamiḻ* was a modern phenomenon. Kings and other 'big men' in the far and recent past did not speak to large crowds in public places, let alone in *sentamiḻ*. Only in the period of the Dravidian movement did Tamil leaders began taking to the stage to publicly speak, ironically perhaps, in a speech genre sourced from Protestant homily (Bate 2004, 2005, 2010). As Barney argued, it was through this modern mode of oratorical address, with its pre-modern mon-archial aesthetics, that a democratic Tamil public was performatively brought into the world.

From Screen to Secretariat

With independence, ongoing agitations in the Madras Presidency for the creation of language community–based states resulted, first, in the creation of Andhra Pradesh (for Telugu speakers) in 1953 (Mitchell 2009) and later, with the States Reorganisation Act of 1956, with the creation of Madras State (for Tamils; renamed Tamil Nadu in 1968), Kerala (for Malayalam speakers), and Mysore State (for Kannada speakers; renamed Karnataka in 1973). While film production in the first decades of the twentieth-century in south India were resolutely multilingual and non-regionally specific in their distribution (Hughes 2011; Nakassis 2015), with the linguistic division of the Madras Presidency distribution channels came to be enclosed by state boundaries, and the film industry of the Madras Presidency gave way to regional industries associated with named languages (viz. the Telugu industry of Andhra Pradesh, the Tamil industry of Tamil Nadu, etc.).

Already using popular theater as a political medium, from the late 1940s onwards leaders of the DMK party such as Annadurai and Karun-anidhi began to turn to cinema to propagate party ideology, penning scr-eenplays (many of which were plays they had written and produced) for party-affiliated heroes to, among other things, espouse oratorically efflorescent monologues in line with Dravidianist narratives (Hardgrave 1971, 1973, 1979; Pandian 1991; Krishnan 2009). In addition, the DMK utilized charismatic film stars such as Sivaji Ganesan (1928–2001) and M.

G. Ramachandran (1917–1987) to draw large crowds to their public meet-ings, wherein they staged an imagined community of ancient Tamil sover-eignty, as ritually invoked through *sentamiḻ*. Cinema as a medium of pol-itical communication followed closely on the heels of the oratorical revol-ution in public politics and was quickly conjoined to it.

The most popular such star was M. G. Ramachandran, also known as *Makkaḷ Tilakam* ('Pride of the People') and *Puraṭci Talaivar* ('the Rev-olutionary Leader'). MGR was closely affiliated with the DMK; he joined in 1953, contested and won elections on DMK tickets in 1962 (state legis-lative assembly) and 1967 (Tamil Nadu legislative assembly), and served as party treasurer from 1969 to 1972. As K. Sivathamby (1981) and M. S. S. Pandian (1992) have noted, MGR's popularity rode alongside that of the DMK, and while his films promoted DMK party ideology, the narrative textuality of his swashbuckling folkloric but also socially realist films held out a space especially for him as *the* hero of the masses who will bring social justice. With the death of C. N. Annadurai in 1969, tensions in the DMK between Mu. Karunanidhi, who took over the party, and MGR resulted in the latter leaving the party in 1972 to form the Annadurai DMK (or ADMK; later AIADMK), largely out of his well-organized and exten-sive fan club network (Dickey 1993a, 1993b). Following the Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi in 1977 (which dissolved the DMK regional government and resulted in President's Rule), the A(IA)DMK won the elections. MGR ruled the state as a democratically elected monarch, as Madhava Prasad (2014) has put it, until his death in 1987. Since then, control of the state government has oscillated between Karunanidhi's DMK and the AIADMK, helmed by MGR's onscreen and offscreen consort, *Puraṭci Talaivi* ('the Revolutionary [Female] Leader') J. Jayalalitha (1948–2016) until her death in late 2016.

M. Madhava Prasad (2014) has termed this close relationship between south Indian cinema—and in particular, its "mass heroes"—and politics *cine-politics*. As Prasad has argued, cine-politics turns on the way in which a certain kind of hero-centered film textuality not only emplots the hero-character as a leader of the masses, but also presupposes an offscreen surplus—the star image of the celebrity actor—that it integrates into and projects out of the narrative (also see Srinivas 2009, 2013, 2016). Such films "build up" the image of the hero-star as a *talaivar* ('leader'), adulating him and figuring his audiences not only as fans, but as followers. It is this cine-political surplus that actors like MGR have leveraged to segue from

the film industry into state-level politics. Enabled by the historically contingent lamination and realignment of the (Tamil) language community (*sensu* Silverstein 1998), the electorally organized state (viz. Tamil Nadu), and the political economy of film distribution and exhibition (as coterminous with both; cf. Chakravarthy 2002, 236), in this sub-national postcolonial context, it is the textual body and embodied image of the mass hero-star through which political community has been consistently, though not exclusively, imagined, represented, and enacted (cf. Anderson 1991).

While from the 1950s to the 1970s, only MGR starred in such cine-political star-vehicles in the Tamil industry, as Rajan Krishnan (2009) has argued, with his exit from the screen, this film position and narrative was generalized into a generic type, such that emerging hero-stars such as "Superstar" *Style Mannan*" ('King of Style') Rajinikanth (b. 1950) and *Karuppu MGR* ('the Dark-Skinned MGR') "Captain" Vijayakanth (b. 1952) could take on the mantle of heroes to the masses. These actors have either entered into politics after successful film careers (as with Vijayakanth, ultimately with disappointment) or, as with Rajinikanth, have held out the possibility that they might one day (Rajanayagam 2015).

Two Media of Tamil Politics

Here, then, are two communicative media that have been linked to the emergence of a Dravidian public sphere: the oratorical eloquence of 'pure Tamil' and the populist cine-politics of commercial cinema. A number of authors have drawn the line between them, focusing on the common imaginaries/narratives of stage oratory and DMK films (Pandian 1992; Dickey 1993a), the use of DMK-style oratory performed within such films (Pandian 1991; Krishnan 2009), or the use of film songs within Dravidianist political party meetings (Bate 2009:80). In this paper, I trace a different, if related connection between speech and screen: a common *aesthetic form*, a poetics, or tropology, that is shared between the mass-hero film and Dravidianist oratory. I do so, however, by focusing on a later period than the hey-day of the DMK film—the 1990s—and on a different star than MGR—Rajinikanth. Rajinikanths films from the 1990s are a rich site for the poetics of cine-politics, this period being a high-point both of Rajini's popularity and of speculation that he would enter electoral politics.

Further, this is the same period as Barney's dissertation fieldwork (1992–1995) (Bate 2000:viii–x), providing a useful comparison case to his ethnographic materials on Tamil oratory and its Dravidian aesthetics.

In what follows, I show how the adulatory aesthetics of Rajinikanth's films work through a particular tropology that Barney identified as central to what he called the Dravidian aesthetic—namely, the trope of *ākupeyar* (roughly glossable as metonymy / synechdoche) as used in events of political praise (*pukaḻ*). My suggestion, in effect, is that such a linguistic tropology of praise and adulation can be found at play into the multimodal poetics of the mass film of Tamil cinema. This poetics, I argue, was one basis of Rajinikanth's cine-political potential in the 1990s.

Oratorical Praise of the Party Leader

One of the central features of political discourse in Tamil Nadu is praise: praise by lower-level leaders to higher-level leaders, and vice versa. As Bate (2009:97) argued,

> Praise by subordinates is (and emblematizes) an ancient cultural logic in the production of power in the Tamil lands, a logic by which the praiser participates in the greatness of the praised at the very moment of naming that greatness. … [P]raise embodies power and one's relationship to it: one praises one's leader with the desire to participate in the world of that leader and to thereby generate greatness for oneself. The logic of this practice … is contained in the very tropic structures found in the vocative phrases … deployed in the mainstream political practice of contemporary Tamilnadu.

Bate argued that the basis of these tropic structures comes from—because they are indexically invoked by modern Dravidianist orators—classical Tamil literature and the indigenous treatises that provide their grammar. Bate focused on sutra 290 of the 13th century grammar, *Nannūl* and commentaries on it; in particular, their treatment of the tropic paradigm *ākupeyar*, what Bate translates as "transformed words" (*āku* 'become [s. thing]' + *peyar* 'word, noun'; E. Annamalai [1990] translates it as "transference noun"). Following A. K. Ramanujan's (1985, 1999:43–44) discussion of the tropology of the Sangam literature, Bate suggested that metonymy, in the form of *ākupeyar*, is the dominant of Tamil poetics,[2]

which favors relations of contiguity (or indexicality) over similarity (or iconicity; viz. metaphor, as in Western poetics).[3]

Ākupeyar comprises sixteen named tropes (though the set is essentially open-ended, as E. Annamalai [1990] has noted). Each involves a semantic relation between a head noun whose default meaning is "transferred" in some tropic usage. Such extensions move from species to genus, or vice versa, and may include place, time, part, attribute, activity, measurement, instrument, container, result, actor, whereby some part of a whole (a place, time, part, quality, etc.) is used to name the whole, or vice versa. For example,

(1) *ūr   sirittatu*
    town laugh-PST.NEUT.
    'the town laughed', to mean 'the townspeople laughed'
    (*iṭavākupeyar, ākupeyar* of place-to-s.thing in/of that place)

(2) *aṭuppiliruntu   pālai   iṟakku*
    stove-ABL.   milk-ACC. take off.IMP
    'Take the milk off the stove' (to mean, 'Take the pot of milk off the
    stove') (*tāniyākupeyar, ākupeyar* of container-to-contained)

(3) *talaikku   pattu   rūbāy koṭu*
    head-DAT. ten   rupee give.IMP.
    'Give ten rupees per head' (to mean, 'Give ten rupees per person')
    (*cinaiyākupeyar, ākupeyar* of part-to-whole)

As Bate (2009:100) notes, such relations involve a contiguity of elements: "As the author of *Nannul* describes it, *akupeyar* depicts one thing in terms of another; but unlike metaphor … the two relata always exist *in praesentia*: both are present in some contiguous relationship with each other."[4] *Ākupeyar*, we might further say following A. K. Ramanujan, is itself a metonym of a more general motif of reciprocal relations of encompassment:

> [C]ontainer-contained relations are seen in many kinds of concepts and images [in Tamil literature]: not only in culture-nature, but also god-world, king-kingdom, devotee-god, mother-child. … what is contained mirrors the container; the microcosm is both *within* and like the macrocosm, and paradoxically also contains it (Ramanujan 1999: 44; also see Ramanujan 1985:247, 264).[5]

Bate's discussion, thus, moves us from a semantico-grammatical relation (as in *Nannūl*) to a pragmatic process, from (grammars on) literature to the nitty gritty (if also beautiful poetics) of politicking (Bate 2009:107).

As Bate shows, political oratorical moments of address and praise draw on such tropes heavily; in particular, on a particular subclass of *ākupeyar*: *tāniyākupeyar*, where "the thing containing or characterizing something takes on the name of the thing contained or characterized" (Bate 2009:104–105; see (2) above for a standard example), like feelings for the heart or light for a lamp. Consider Bate's examples of vocatives of address displayed on temporarily erected arches put over the roads leading to a DMK party meeting in Madurai, August 1994:

(4)   *uṭanpiṟappukkaḷin   uyir-ē*
      Siblings-GEN.   life-EMPH./VOC.
      'O, Life of the Siblings'

This heralding is addressed to the leader of the DMK, Kalaiñar Karunanidhi, put up by a party functionary. As Bate argues, the phrase of praise not only addresses the leader (as a first-order index) but also points to the party member (as a second-order index of speaker). And while neither are co-present, the vocative/emphatic *-ē* presupposes a virtual co-presence that renders hailer and hailed contiguous with each other (Bate 2009:108), such that each "dwell[s] inside" the other, such that the praiser "enjoys an intimate, emotional and fruitful relationship with his leader" (ibid.:112). This presencing is enabled by the fact that the phrase has a citational relationship with Kalaiñar's own trademark salutation to his audiences, used to close his opening salutations at public meetings:

(5) *en   uyir-in-um   mēl-āna   anbu uṭanpirappukkaḷ-ē*
     1prs.OBL. life-COM.-CL.   above-ADJ. love siblings-EMPH./VOC.
     'O, my siblings whom I love even more than my own life.'

Here, then, the party worker hails his leader as he (like all party members) has been hailed before, and as he anticipates being hailed again in the upcoming meeting. This renders the vocative in (4) not simply an event of praising address, but a performative baptism of sorts, an act of naming that metonymically draws that name from the mouth of the named (Kalaiñar). Further note how *uṭanpirappukkaḷ* ('siblings') figurates the party as a consanguineal group, whose very life is the party leader, Kalaiñar Karunanidhi. Kalaiñar loves the party and its workers (his siblings) more than

his own life even as *he*, in fact, is the life of the party and its workers. This reversible container-contained trope of *tāniy-ākupeyar* figurates an exchange, of each placing the other's life at the core of their own being (and thus above their own individual being). Life (that which is contained by a body) appears in/as the name for the container (the person and his body), which itself contains the party within it (in/as the body of the leader). A similar trope (laminated on top a trope of *karuviyākupeyar*, where effect substitutes for its cause) is enacted in the following vocative from the same conference:

(6)   *Kaṭum puyal-il   kal̲akam   kākka   itayat-tuṭipp-ē*
       fierce   storm-LOC. party   protect-INF. heart-beat-EMPH./VOC.
       'O, Heart-beat that protects the party in a fierce storm'

As Bate details, such political discourse takes place within ritualesque meetings enframed by monumental, temporary structures (like the cut-outs of archeways from which these vocatives cry out, as well as fortress-like entrances and gargantuan representations of party luminaries) that unwind a chronotope of a Tamil kingdom of yore in the here-and-now. The speeches in *sentamil̲* that are proleptically anticipated by such vocative phrases (which draw on bhakthi devotional poetry and king-praising inscriptional genres of *meykeerthi* and *prashasthi*, Barney suggests) place the orator at the ritual epicenter of this chronotope (centerstage, literally), even as the temporal order of such orators places the party leader at its zenith. Praised at every step of the way (from the arches to the preceding speeches to the crowd's adulatory cheers), the orator-leader within this Dravidianist imaginary comes to embody the antiquity of Tamil civilization and the Tamil language itself, a fact itself made explicit in praise that explicitly names the leader *as*, for example, 'Child-like Tamil' and the like (Bate 2009:68).

This performative figuration of the leader as the center of a political party and world that he himself contains in his body is condensed in these vocatives of praise and adulation even as it is unfurled in the pol-itical discourse that follows them in political meetings. And this is to Bate's larger point: through acts of praise political leaders (including former cinema stars, like MGR and Jayalalitha) become both metonymic *and* encompassing of the language community and the state (e.g., Bate 2009:124); and further, that this dialectic of metonymy-encompassment—where the part not only stands in for the whole, but comes to englobe it—

is a central modality of political action in the Dravidianist dispensation that has dominated Tamil Nadu politics for more than the last half century.

Cine-Political Praise of the Hero

Such forms of praise and hierarchical intimacy are not reserved for contemporary, Dravidian oratory; they have also played their part in medieval and contemporary religious modes of worship (*bhakthi*), medieval models of kingship, and, as Arjun Appadurai (1990) has noted, quotidian everyday life.

They are also a central part of cinematic culture in Tamil Nadu. The same tropes of praise and adulation are used by fans to talk about and address film stars, be it in spontaneous discourse, public meetings, or ritual occasions such as celebrations of the star's birthday.[6] And they appear on film hoardings and cutouts whose aesthetics and imagery are exactly the same as those described by Bate for party luminaries (Pandian 2005; Jacob 2009; Gerritsen 2012). Such linguistic and visual culture saturates the streets of neighborhoods where fan clubs are active, and achieve a maximum density around the theaters where the star's films release (cf. Bate 2009:79–89). And as has been much pointed out in academic and journalistic discourse, such images serve as the site of various citational rituals of sovereignty / divinity: honorification (e.g., garlanding the image), ritual purification (e.g., pouring milk or beer or soda on the image), and evil eye (*tiruṣṭi*) prophylaxis.

In what follows, I focus on a different, if related aspect of cinematic praise: on how the film text itself participates in adulating the hero-star; that is, how films of hero-stars like Rajinikanth *constitute* acts of praise themselves. In one sense, the whole of such "mass films"—as involving narratives about powerful heroes who serve justice to the people in ways that "build up" the hero and portray him in a positive light as a leader—is an act of praise of the hero-star (see Pandian 1992 and Dickey 1993a for examples). And within such narratives, of course, specific discursive acts of praise abound: song lyrics that adulate the star, dialogues by the heroine, the villain, and other characters that praise him, or in the look of the camera, and of characters in the film, that admire him. In what follows, I touch on these. My main aim, however, is to detail how dialogue, gesture,

mis-en-scène, shot composition and editing, and intra- and inter-textual poetic references are entextualized as complexly composite, multimodal acts of praise. Such tropes enact a reversible container-contained relationship between followers and leader, language community and hero-star in precisely the ways discussed above for political oratory. Critical to my point is that such tropes are not simply representations of such a relationship, but through a particular semiotics and ontology of the filmic image (*sensu* Bazin 1967; Morgan 2006), *presence* the hero-star in the event of his appearance. The effect is that figurations of this metonymy-encompassment onscreen are simultaneously in the time-space of the theater (and thus potentially beyond it), thereby performatively effectuating what they represent.

Poetics-Politics of Praise in *Padaiyappa* (1999)

Rajinikanth's post-1990s film oeuvre is littered with acts of praise: scenes where his friends, family members, lovers, and even/especially enemies admire and praise his strength, character, speech, (dark-skinned) beauty, *style*, and good heart and willingness to help the people (to the extent of suggesting that if he came to politics, all would be solved), likening him to a lion (an emblem of sovereignty in India), a tiger (figure 1 – top), an immoveable mountain, an innocent child, a king, and a deity (for which his characters are most often named),[7] among other figures. Some of these tropes directly mirror imagery discussed by Bate in visual form: for example, Rajinikanth's 2007 film *Sivaji* features a montage (~2:18:30) which shows Rajini's trademark *stylish* gait, his footsteps turning dirt roads into paved roads, arid landscapes into lush farmlands, straw-thatched huts into residential complexes (bearing his name, Sivaji) as he walks.[8] This CGI montage directly invokes a motif from the medieval king-praising *mey-kirthi*s—"even wastelands flourish if your foot steps there" (Bate 2009: 127)—and adulatory praise showered on political leaders such as Jayalalitha in the mid-1990s:

> O, Fantasy who brought the Kaveri River to fatten this golden fertile country for all of history! …
> O, Our Goddess of Love who has placed her foot in Anna District!
> O, Leader equal to the Lion! (quoted in Bate 2009:128).

Similarly, consider the trope of *maṭakku*, meaning 'a folding, refracting (through a prism)' (also 'to repeat, overpower, stop with an argument, to deflect, destroy, kill, tame, humble, counteract') (see Shulman 2017). In tropes of *maṭakku* a particular sound is alliteratively repeated across a piece of discourse to give it rhetorical force (Bate 2009:129–130). As Bate notes, such a trope finds visual expression in political posters that multiply the image of the leader. We find similar tropes throughout Rajinikanth's films, as when his body is multiplied onscreen (figure 1 – bottom) or when repeated jump cuts of the same action are multiplied in time. In both cases, the multiplication of Rajini's body in time or space honorificates him (cf. the trope of *mariyātai*, or 'respect' through grammatical/semantic plurality) even as it connotes his power and prowess.

Figure 1. From "Vetri Kodi Kattu" ('Raise the Victory Flag'), *Padaiyappa* (1999; dir. K. S. Ravikumar): Shot 1 (above): Rajini walks towards the camera in a (medium) close-up as his face morphs into a tiger's and then back to his own (not shown); shot 2 (below): the camera then cuts to a long shot, with Rajini multiplied onscreen, a visualization of the literary trope of *maṭakku*.

Below I focus on *Padaiyappa* (1999, directed by K. S. Ravikumar), Rajinikanth's hugely popular 150th film, marking twenty-five years in the industry.[9] I give a close analysis of the opening sequence of the film and the pre-climax confrontation with the villainess. In these two scenes, we see Rajini figurated as the container and contained of the Tamil ethnolinguistic community, which is to say, the polity itself. For their performative effectivity, such tropes depend on Rajinikanth's presence *in* his image. It is this presence, I suggest, that allows Rajini to encompass the scene of his appearance, and thus incorporate his audience as into his body politic. This tropology, I argue, is the basis of Rajini's, ultimately unredeemed (and perhaps insufficient), cine-political potential.

Heralding the Superstar

Since reaching his apogee in the 1990s, Rajinikanth's appearance in a film is never simply as a representation of a character, for every such film is always already a *Rajinikanth* film, a star vehicle that takes place in his proper names (Chakravarthy 2002; Nakassis 2016a:188–223).[10] While this fact is apparent from the publicity and marketing that appear before the film is released (or even made) and from the posters that enveloped the theater as one enters its premises, it is also ritually entextualized at the paratextual edge of his films, announced at the outset of its reels, as shown in Figure 2 below.

This twenty-eight second animated sequence, with attendant theme music, comes before the film proper begins. It often follows a number of other precursory images—the censor-board certificate, credits to financiers, images honoring very important persons, the production house's introduction logo, the film's title card—though it may also precede them, as in *Padaiyappa* where Rajini's "Superstar" sequence comes after the censor-board certificate but before both the production house's logo and the film's title card. The first of the artists' and technician's credits (the last of which is always the director's), this sequence heralds the appearance of the hero-star with his proper (nick)name, "Rajni" and sobriquet, "Superstar." While Rajinikanth began to be referred to as the Superstar as early as 1978 (in posters and other cinema metadiscourse; see Kalaipuli Thaanu 2007, 172–174), it wasn't until the early 1990s that this star-designating epithet mandatorily appeared onscreen before each of his films began,

starting with the 1992 Suresh Krissna directed film *Annamalai,* which first used the animated sequence depicted in Figure 2 (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 89; cf. Kalaippul Thaanu 2007, 174). The use of this sequence has continued since, though with updated graphics and sounds since the mid-2000s (post-*Baba* [2002; dir. Suresh Krissna]).

Figure 2. Rajinikanth's 1990s-era title-credit sequence: "SUPER STAR" is written, dot by dot, on screen, followed by the letters R – A – J – N – I [sic] that fly towards the audience, one at a time, accompanied by a laser sound-effected swoosh, and then return altogether to sit between "SUPER" and "STAR."
A bright white outline lights up the edges of the word "RAJNI," and then subsides. "RAJNI" then flies off the screen into the background as "ரஜினி" (*Rajini*), his name in Tamil script, flies in to replace it. It too is then emblazoned by a white outline.

As Krissna describes in a collection of remembrances about the films he made with Rajinikanth in the 1990s and early 2000s, "Surely Rajnikanth, who was becoming a phenomenon, warranted a unique logo to go with his name, I thought" (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012:89). Likening it to the classic James Bond title sequence, Krissna narrates how he pitched the idea to Rajini: "…Till now you've been described as the Superstar by a few. But the time has come for the status [i.e. "Superstar"] to precede your name in the titles. So I'll create a logo and a signature tune for it, which will announce the arrival of Brand Rajni. The impact will be magical" (Krissna and Rangarajan 2012:90). Supplanting and enveloping the name of the actor, this "status" englobes the film that follows *in the name of Rajini's star image,* as an iteration of what has come before and what is to come in the future, a compilation of his previous characters and more, his transtextual identity as the Superstar (Nakassis 2016a:208–212).[11]

At this first moment of revelation, audiences clap, throw confetti, whistle and yell (e.g., "*Rajini vāḻka! Talaivar vāḻka*" 'Long live Rajini! Long live our leader!'), responding to and welcoming this virtual/semi-presencing of the hero-star before he can finally be seen onscreen. As Naren, a close friend and former ardent Rajini fan in his teenage years (in the 1990s) said in 2016, the claps begin with this moment because 'it's our [INCL.] leader's name, our leader the Superstar. Our leader is going to come, a new joy, the film's begun. He's arrived!' ("*Atu talaivan peyar, talaivan Superstar. Talaivan varappōṟāru, putu uṟcākam, paṭam ārambicciruccu. Vantuṭṭāru!*"). Here Naren's slippage between narrating a future act of presencing (*varappōṟāru*, 'come. INF.-go.PRES.-3s.HON.') and a past, completive one (*vantuṭṭāru*, 'come.AVP.-COMPL.PST.-3s.HON.') figures how Rajini's proper names bear some quantum of his presence. Akin to the vocatives on the archeways Bate discussed, this naming sequence announces that Rajinikanth is in the building.

Seeing the Superstar

If the title-credit sequence heralds the hero-star and his "status," in Rajini's 1990s films it is his introduction sequence and opening song that fully presences him onscreen and in the theater. Consider, for example, *Padaiyappa*'s extended opening sequence. After Rajini's "Superstar" sequence follow the producer's banner and the film's title's CGI introduction and theme music. Next comes a relatively long preamble to Rajini's entry (for Rajinikanth films, at least) consisting of two scenes: a marriage at a temple and the heroine worshipping at a snake nest.

A number of key characters and actors are introduced before Rajinikanth enters the narrative; in the first scene, veteran actor-star Sivaji Ganesan (as we later learn, the father of Rajini's character) as the local 'big man' who hereditarily maintains the village's Arupadaiyappa (Murugan) temple; in the subsequent scene, Rajini's love interest, Vasundhara (played by Soundarya) and the villainess and Padaiyappa's cross-cousin, Neelambari (memorably played by Ramya Krishna).[12]

After the temple scene which frames Rajini/Padaiyappa's lineage as the stewards of the village and its Murugan/Padaiyappa temple, the film cuts to a young woman, Vasudharan who is pouring milk into a vessel while worshipping a cobra's nest (a sacred site for some Hindus).[13] A group of men fearfully run into the scene upon seeing a (different?) snake,

at which point one man near to Vasundhara says, 'What the hell, those women are boldly pouring milk for the snake! Are you all men or what, get out of here!' When he hears the snake, however, he comically jumps in fright. Cut to the snake slithering on the ground. Cut to a black sports car driving quickly to the scene alongside a peppy song, with shots back and forth between the snake and the car. When the car arrives at the scene, the frightened men run in front of the car, which screeches to a halt to avoid hitting them.[14] We hear them whisper in fear that it's the 'boss lady' (*mutalāḷiyammā*). Neelambari, who is also Vasundhara's employer, gets out of the car, scolds the men, and arrogantly orders them to kill the snake, despite their later protests of the sacredness of its nest. They proceed to try and stab it with their metal pikes, as the pious Vasundhara prays to Arupadaiyappa (Murugan) to protect the snake. At the last second, right before the men are about to attack the snake (who has retreated into its nest) a hand and forearm with its sleeve stylishly rolled up enters the frame, grabbing the pike (figure 3 – left). Cut to the shocked-and-awed faces of the men (figure 3 – right) and then to Neelambari's surprise.

Figure 3. Rajini's "entry" in *Padaiyappa* (1999). Left: the lone hand answering a prayer for Arupadaiyappa; right: the shocked-and-awed faces of the local men.

Cut back to the hand which throws off the pike and the man attached to it, who flies impossibly high into the air. Cut away shots to the shocked/ impressed faces of Neelambari and Vasudharan are followed by a cut back to the snake nest. The film's theme music kicks in and we see the hand reach into the nest to pull out the cobra with, again, cutaways to the impressed and awestruck characters. (At this point Neelambari takes off her stylish sunglasses.)

In slow motion, after much deferral and exciting waiting, we finally see Rajini! He rises up in profile as the theme music yells "Hey! Padaiyappa!" (his character's name we can infer). (Note how his character's namesake turns out to be none other than the god that the heroine prayed to for

protection, whose temple his lineage also hereditarily maintains, that of the prototypical Tamil deity, Arupadaiyappa/Murugan.) Staring the sna-ke down as he smiles, he slowly turns to look directly into the camera and then stylishly salutes the camera/audience with his free hand (along with a swoosh sound effect—to connote the speed and power of his gesture—and another chant of "Hey! Padaiyappa!" from the chorus) (figure 4).

Figure 4. At last! Rajini's revelation in *Padaiyappa* and his salute to the audience

In revelatory moments such as this, where the hero-star's appearance has been desirously expected and excitingly deferred, his materialization on screen is a sight to behold. He reveals himself in his full plenitude, in full-frontal bust shots that show us his face, foregrounded from all else. This moment is not just a moment to see, however. It is a moment of transaction as well. As with Rajini's title-credit sequence (though not with the same intensity), Rajini's "entry" in the theater is greeted by the audience with whistling, clapping, throwing confetti, jumping up and down, touching the screen, and yellingly addressing and praising him: "*Talaivā!*" ('Leader [VOC.]!') or even "*Manitakaṭavuḷ!*" ('Human god!'), as Naren reported from his remembrances of watching Rajini films from the 1990s and as I similarly heard at the 6:00 am first-day show of Rajini's 2016 film, *Kabali* in Madurai (also see Srinivas 2009; Gerritsen 2012).[15]

And the image responds. This response takes the form of an aesthetics of frontality that continually shows us the eyes and face of the hero-star as he looks straight at us (Kapur 1987). It also often includes direct address to the audience or even reference to the time and place of theatrical viewing,[16] as with the image in figure 4 that has Rajini *stylishly* saluting the audience.

When Rajinikanth is onscreen in such moments he is *present*. He is close to us, with us in the theater, seeing us, saluting us. This is not just a physical co-presence. It is also an affective intimacy, even co-substance. As Naren noted, when you see Rajini looking at you, when he [HON.] comes down from the screen to talk to you ("*iṟaṅki pēsuvāru*"), to directly order you

("*nēraṭiyā* order *pōṭuvāru*"), we feel that not only are we in the presence of a 'big man and a great leader' ("*oru periya āḷu, periya talaivan*"), but also 'our [INCL.] elder brother' ("*namma aṇṇan*"), 'someone from our house, someone that we're really close with' ("*namma vīṭle oruttar*," "*romba nerukkamānavar*") (Dickey 1993b:351, 356).

To say that Rajini is with us in the theater, then, is to say that the sign of Superstar Rajinikanth (a representation of a character in a fiction on a screen) *is*, in some measure, Superstar Rajinikanth himself. As Vivek, a middle-class friend and Rajini fan in his early twenties put it to me in 2008, when he saw Rajini's introductory shot in his 2008 film *Kuselan* he felt he was in the presence of a divinity, an affective stance to the image also reported by Naren: 'It's like he's looking at us. They always have a close-up of Rajini. They'll show his eyes. … A lot of people say it: seeing his eyes is like seeing a god' ("*Nammaḷe pākkuṟa mātiri irukkum. Rajinikku eppavumē* close-up *vaippāṅka. Kaṇṇayē kāṭṭuvāṅka. Niṟaiya pēr solluvāṅka: avaru kaṇṇa pāttavuṭanēyē oru kaṭavuḷai pārttatu mātiri anta viṣayam*").[17] 'In (Rajini's) eyes,' Naren said shortly after, 'there is some kind of power' ("*Etō oru sakti irukku kaṇṇule*"). Through this presencing, Rajini comes to be sutured into and immanent in the film text, offered up as an object of praise on both sides of the screen: in the diegetic world and in the theater, and in the traffic between them.

In this opening sequence and its play between representation and presence, we can note a range of modalities of praise: impressed looks by by-standing men (who have earlier set up the criterion for real masculinity—courage before the snake—that Rajini/Padaiyappa satisfies); demurely romantic and sexually desirous looks by the film's main female characters; and homonymic/eponymous equations of the hero with a potent, divine protector realized here-and-now. We can also note note how the camera itself lingers on Rajini, slowed down to show him to us, allowing for off-screen moments of praise and adulation by excited audience members. And, of course, there is Rajini/Padaiyappa's power and prowess, for example, in throwing off a grown man into the air with just a flick of his wrist, or in showing no fear in charming a snake.

As a relatively elaborated ritual that is typical of all of Rajini's films from this period, in this opening sequence it is not simply the character, Padaiyappa that is being praised, but simultaneously and more importantly, Rajinikanth. This lamination continues throughout the film, though it becomes more important in certain moments than others, such that the

narrative structure of the film itself comes to praise Rajini within and bey-
ond the confines of the text.

Encompassing the scene of his presencing

If Rajini is figured as an object of praise, this praise is refracted back to the
audience, much in the same way as we saw in the mutual praise between
Karunanidhi and his party workers. That Rajini stands in this relationship
to his audience is most apparent in events where he directly addresses and
points at them.

   Let's pick up with *Padaiyappa*'s opening scene again. After Rajini/Pad-
aiyappa salutes the audience, the camera cuts back to the impressed faces
of the onlookers, then to Rajini/Padaiyappa who kisses and pets the cobra
on its expanded hood. Cut to the sexy Neelambari looking Padaiyappa up
and down (who returns her amorous gaze), and then to the heroine who
stands there worshipping/thanking him. Upon seeing her, he is visibly
shook-up and the theme music stops abruptly. (He takes off his sunglasses
to take her in—poetically mirroring Neelambari's stance toward him—and
we see his eyes and face for the first time in a full-frontal close-up.) We
then see the man whom Rajini/Padaiyappa threw off looking at him with
trepidation, then trying to sneak away. Rajini/Padaiyappa smiles, walks
toward him and affectionately puts his hand on his chin, slapping him aff-
ectionately on the cheek twice as the man beams. Cut to a high-angle zip
crane shot of Rajini with the crowd of men behind him smiling as the open-
ing song of the film begins. Rajini sings the first two lines, only to be int-
errupted by Neelambari, who haughtily snaps and asks him, in English,
"Hey, who are you man?" Rajini/Padaiyappa answers with the chorus of
the song, aptly entitled "*En Peru Padaiyappa*" ('My Name is Padaiyappa'),
and contines with its elaborate dance sequence.

   Consider how Rajini's pointing gestures, the mis-en-scène, and the lyr-
ics in this song diagram his containment within the ethnolinguistic polity
that contains his audience. At the end of the first verse, he sings, "*tālāṭṭi
vaḷarttatu tamiḻ nāṭṭu maṇṇappā*!" '(I was) lovingly raised by the Tamil Nadu
soil, man!' As he sings this, Rajini points down at the ground at his feet,
with rural-looking male and female onlookers to his right and left, and a
line of dancers and drummers behind him (figure 5).

Figure 5. Rajini pointing at the ground from which he was raised,
from the song *En Peru Padaiyappa* ('My Name is Padaiyappa').

Later in the song he sings,

'I don't need luxury or property like a ten-story house.
I don't need titles or posts.
No need to garland me, or give me a golden crown.
The love that the Tamil motherland gave me is more than enough. (*Tamiḻ tāynāṭu tanta anbu pōtumē*).
Isn't it Tamil that paid me one pound of gold coins for shedding a bead of my sweat? (*En oru tuḷi vērvaikku oru pavun taṅka kāsu koṭuttatu Tamiḻ allavā?*)
Isn't it right for me to sacrifice body and soul to the cause of the Tamil language and people? (figure 6) (*En uṭal poruḷ āviyai Tamiḻukkum Tamiḻarkkum koṭuppatu muṟai allavā?*)

As he sings that his sweat was repaid by the Tamil language in gold, we see a close-up of a CGI sweatdrop fall on dry dirt and turn into a gold coin. And as he sings that it is only right that he sacrifice body and soul in thanks to the Tamil people and their language, he points directly at the camera as a crowd of onlookers watch him with smiling approval and joined hands (figure 6).

Figure 6. Rajini walking towards the camera (left) while pointing at (right) and singing to us in the song "*En Peru Padaiyappa*" ('My name is Padaiyappa!'), from *Padaiyappa* (1999): 'Is it not right for me to sacrifice my body and soul to the cause of the Tamil language and people?'

Here the trope entails a part (Rajini's sweat) joining with a whole (the soil) that, as we remember, raised and nurtured Rajini, only to turn into wealth. For this alchemic transference of dirt to personhood to sweat to dirt to gold, Rajini is ready to give his body and soul back to the Tamil soil, people, and language as thanks. The reference, of course, is to the Tamil audience's acceptance and support of him as a hero-star, that is, for making him what he is (rich and famous) and rewarding his hard work! Important to see here is how the denotation of this lyric is indexically grounded in the theatrical context and addresses the audience. This is accomplished both through both Rajini's deictic gesture, the suggested/inferable intertext to his offscreen biography (as related to the current instance of support/viewing), and, as argued above, his *presence* in the image and thus in the theater.

Such acts of pointing at the audience, thus, position the audience not as simple spectators (that is, those who watch the screen from its other side) but as those who, by being pointed at and by seeing proxies of themselves watching Rajini pointing with approval and admiration (the onlooking crowds behind him), welcome Rajini into the consanguineal ethnolinguistic community as their (adopted) kin and willing martyr. In doing so the film invites its spectators to pass through the screen so as to stand behind and with Rajini. And we might add, as I show below, so that Rajini may come to stand as their political representative.

Such overtures are all the more important because, as noted above, Rajinikanth (née Sivaji Rao Gaekwad) is not ethnolinguistically Tamil. He is from a Maharashtrian background, born in the neighboring state of Karnataka. While ethnolinguistic belonging has never been a criterion for a hero standing in for the polity (MGR too was known not to be ethno-

linguistically Tamil), in Tamil Nadu alignment with the Tamil language community is. By professing allegiance to the language community while pointing at (and in effect thanking) what is figured in such films as its theatrical metonym—the audience—Rajinikanth enacts both his encompassment by the language community and his encompassment of it, entering it as a stranger king while staying on as intimate kin (as Naren noted above), standing beyond and above while also within it. As Naren said of such scenes, 'When he's looking at and speaking to the people, we'll think like, he's a hero for us, a hero who speaks for us' ("*Makkaḷai pāttu pēsum pōtu, nammaḷukkāna* hero, *nammaḷukkāka pēsurāru appaṭi nnu ninaippōm*"). But also speaking *as* us. As Naren said on a more recent occasion when I asked how fans understand moments in songs such as this—when, for example, Rajini sings his own praise (in "*En Peru Padaiyappa*," singing about his youthful, stylish gait)—he responded by saying, 'Whatever's in people's hearts concerning Rajini, that's what comes out from Rajini's words' ("*Makkaḷuṭaiya manasule Rajini-ai parri enna nenekkirāṅkaḷō atu Rajiniyōṭa vārttaiyiliruntu veḷiyā varutu*"). In short, in songs such as this Rajini both praises his audience and voices their praise of him, his words to addressed them but ultimately sourced from *their* own hearts (*manasu*), from they who have raised and rewarded him, who have given his very being substance. Rajini speaking to us, for us, as us; being for us and now even one of us—here we find a complex transposition and series of transactions across the screen's multiple sides. Rajini's image acts to incorporate his audience into his complexly mediated being, entailing a consubstantiation between sign and object that reverses itself as a relation of containing and containment, praiser and praised.

Consider a more complex trope of metonymy and encompassment which takes place in the pre-climax of the film. Here, more than elsewhere the particular political context of the film (rather than its generic political form) is important. *Padaiyappa* was released in April 1999, five months before assembly elections in Tamil Nadu, and at a high point of speculation that Rajinikanth would imminently enter electoral politics. This has been built up to by a series of veiled and not-so-veiled onscreen and offscreen references to the state's political situation and, in particular, to J. Jayalalitha, Chief Minister during this particular period (1991–1996) (see, e.g., Tamiḻvāṉaṉ 2002, 214–228; Sreekanth 2008, 125–132; Krissna and Rangarajan 2012, 70–71).[18] At the time of its release, *Padaiyappa* was transparently seen by audiences and the press as a political commentary, with the film's

female villain taken as a stand-in for Jayalalitha, with the narrative functioning as an allegory for an arrogant woman (Jayalalitha/Neelambari) who dared to spite the hero (Rajinikanth/Padaiyappa) and was subsequently taught a lesson and swept from power.

The film's dramatic pre-climax takes place 18 years after the introduction scene. Padaiyappa and Vasundhara have married, a humiliation that has driven Neelambari mad with rage. She has returned one generation later to exact revenge on Padaiyappa by orchestrating a false romance between her brother's son, Chandru and Padaiyappa's daughter. Chandru's father/Neelambari's brother/Padaiyappa's cross-cousin, Suryaprakash has in the interim become an important politician and government minister. In cahoots with his sister, Suryaprakash has arranged the marriage of Chandru to another, leaving Padaiyappa's daughter in the lurch, breaking her heart by denying her her love (as she was so denied) and shaming Padaiyappa in the process.

In this scene, Padaiyappa arrives at the marriage venue to stop the marriage and unite his daughter with Chandru, whom he discovered actually does love his daughter! When Neelambari threateningly commands her brother and the nearby police—who are there to provide security—to beat up and chase Padaiyappa off, Padaiyappa/Rajini responds by laughing and saying, 'Yes dear, I'm a single man, but take a look [-HON.] at all the people who are willing to give their lives to this single man' ("*Heh! Nān tani āḷ tān-mā, ānāl inta tani āḷukkāka uyirē koṭukka ettanai āḻuṅka irukkāṅka ṇṇu koñca ettippāru*"). The low-angle mid-shot initially only shows us the 'single man,' Padaiyappa/Rajini against a blue cloudless sky (figure 7 – top-left). Like Sanzio's Plato, Padaiyappa's/Rajini's arm and index finger raises up as he delivers this line, as if pointing up to the heavens above (figure 7 – top-right). The camera, on a zip crane, rises up and follows after his fingertip as it gestures upwards and then over his backside (figure 7 – middle-left). Dramatic horns and strings enter with a rising melody as the camera follows Rajini's fingertip up and then "behind" him (figure 7 – middle-right), panning ninety-degrees to the right to reveal a sprawling mass of people (farmers, we later overhear a constable telling the police inspector in charge of security) with their hands raised in the air (figure 7 – bottom), yelling in a single but unintelligible voice. It is at them that Rajini (with a little help from the camera) points.

Figure 7. Rajinikanth's index finger in the pre-climax of *Padaiyappa* (1999)

This lengthy single crane shot that moves from Rajini to the subaltern people that support him runs for fifty seconds as the camera snakes along the long winding road that leads to where Rajini is standing. During this shot, the dramatic background score segues into a haunting voice singing the melodic motif of the song "*Vetri Kodi Kattu*" ('Raise the Victory Flag'), from earlier in the film, over a spare drum rhythm. All along the road, throngs of people are coming toward Rajini, walking on foot or riding on tractor-pulled flatbeds. After a series of shots of Neelambari, the press, and the

police in reaction to the crowd, the camera cuts back to Rajini at the head of this Leviathan. Standing across from Neelambari, he says to her:[19]

01	*Pātteyā* [-HON.], *Paṭai-yappāvuṭaiya paṭaiye*? (0.8)	\<hands behind back\>	Did you see [-HON.], Padai-yappa's army (*paṭai*)? (0.8)
02	*Itu summa* trailer *tān mā.* (0.3)	\<lifts LH, palm & fingers parallel to ground; slightly lowers head & hand (fingers pointing slight-ly downward) just before "*tān*," resting at "*mā*" ('dear')\>	This is just the trailer, dear. (0.3)
03	(0.5) Main picture *nī innum pākkale.* (0.7)	\<raises LH index finger & closes other fingers; traces a circle clockwise 3x, then holds index finger pointing up\> \<puts LH behind back\>	(0.5) You still haven't seen the main picture. (0.7)
04	*Pāttē,* (0.5) *āṭippōyiṭuve.*	\<hands behind back\> \<raises LH, palm vertical, fingers extended\> \<LH quick wrist shake back and forth\>	Having seen it, (0.5) you'll tremble.

Here Rajini puns on his character's name, *Paṭaiyappā*, which is composed of the lexemes *paṭai*, which means 'army', and *appā(n)*, here 'lord' or 'general'. Together they reference the god of war, Murugan, or *Ārupaṭaiyappā*, the Lord of the Six Abodes, the deity of the village temple Padaiyappa's family is tasked with running and that Vasundhara prays to at the beginning of the film (and whose prayer Rajini heeds in appearing). The subaltern masses ('army') that Rajini/Padaiyappa points to are already "in" and with him, they stand behind him and in his divine name (see footnote 7). Rajini/Padaiyappa makes this explicit in the monologue that follows through as set of poetic contrasts (see Table 1 for a summary).

Rajini/Padaiyappa contrasts Neelambari and her family (his affinal kin)—at whom he points with his left index finger (figure 8)—as having political influence ("*uṅkaḷukku arasiyal selvākku*," 'you have political influence') while he, he says while pointing at the crowd behind him with both his thumbs (the speed and gravity of his gesture accompanied by a swoosh sound effect) (figure 9 – bottom), has the people's influence ("*enakku makkaḷ selvākku*," 'I have the people's influence'). You live by the police's power ("police-*yōṭa saktile*"), he continues with his hands now behind his back, while I live by the people's power ("*makkaḷōṭa saktile*").

05	*Uṅkaḷukku araciyal selvākku.*	\<LH index finger point-ing at villains\>	You all have political influence. (figure 8)
06	(1)	\<hands behind back\>	(1)
07	*Enakku* \<swoosh sound-effect\> (0.7) *makkaḷ selvākku.*	\<L & R arms raising up\> \<LH & RH thumbs point-ing behind himself\>	I \<swoosh sound-effect\> (0.7) have the people's influence. (figure 9)
08	(1)	\<hands behind back\>	(1)
09	*Nīṅkaḷellām policeyōṭa saktile vāḻṟīṅka.* (0.5)		You all live by the police's power. (0.5)
10	*Nāṉ makkaḷōṭa saktile vāḻṟēṉ.*		I live by the people's power.

Figure 8. Rajini/Padaiyappa points at Neelambari et al. with his left index finger while saying 'You have political influence' (line 5 in the transcript); from *Padaiyappa* (1999)

Rajini/Padaiyappa then points at 'the people' behind him for a second time, this time with only his left thumb (again, accompanied by a swoosh sound effect), and says, 'Before this power …'. He then fully extends his left arm as he points with his index finger (palm down) at the villains in front of him (no sound effect), and says '… your power …'. He begins chuckling as his index finger retracts (his arm still extended), his fingers forming a loose fist (palm down, thumb over his fingertips) which then flick twice toward the villains while he laughs and then audibly inhales. Rajini's second flick holds with all his fingers extended at the villains as he completes the utterance '… is nothing'.[20]

<G1 – left thumb: <G2 – left index finger: <G3 – LH forms loose fist; fingers then flick
  points behind Rajini   points in front of Rajini   2x toward villains (as if brushing them away);
  at 'the people'>   at the villains & police>   LH holds with fingers pointing at villains>

G1---------------------------|G2------------------------------|G3------fl.--fl.----------|<LH returns behind back>
(0.7) *Inta saktikki   munnālē* (0.6) *uṅka   sakti*<chuckles (0.8)> .hh (0.4) *jūjūbi*
      this   power-DAT. before-EMPH.   2pl.OBL.   power   jujube
      'Before this power   your power   <chuckles>   .hh   (is) nothing.'

NB: G1, G2, G3 in the second line of the transcript indicate onsets of the gestures described in the
first line; -----| indicates a hold or continuation of a gesture; fl. = onset of flicking gesture.

In this precisely orchestrated, multimodal act, each gesture's stroke precedes and is held across the discourse that it calls forth, produced in the pregnant pauses in Rajini's speech. These *stylish* gestures proleptically parallel and punctuate his utterance, providing their own gestural proposition alongside his verbal pronouncement.

When the political minister, Suryaprakash (Padaiyappa's cross-cousin and Neelambari's brother) orders the police to shoot into the crowd, individual members at the head of the crowd (Padaiyappa's patrilineal kin and friends) step forward and take up Rajini/Padaiyappa's interpellative pronouncement. They praise Rajini/Padaiyappa and denounce the villains. They declare in impassioned monologues their willingness to be shot and killed in support of Rajini/Padaiyappa and threaten to rip the minister and his family to shreds, if only Rajini/Padaiyappa gives the word. The crowd applauds, showing their collective willingness to do as was said, as Rajini/Padaiyappa stands confidently in silence. Standing behind and incorporated into Rajini, the crowd is an extension of his will, at his finger-tips (and the tip of his tongue), ready to do his bidding.

This lyric co-occurs with a close-up shot of Rajinikanth pointing backwards with both his thumbs (figure 9 – top), a gesture identical to the two-thumbed pointing gesture in the pre-climax (line 7 in the transcript above; figure 9 – bottom). The former image is superimposed over a shot of a huge mass of individuals at which, through these images' juxtaposition, Rajini/Padaiyappa is spectrally pointing. This background image anticipates the pre-climax shots of 'the people' behind Rajini/Padaiyappa (in particular, the throngs of people winding down the road toward the marriage hall in the long fifty-second shot [figure 7]). Together, these images prefigure at the outset of the film what is to come at the outset of its conclusion.

Figure 9. Top – 'One hundred armies (*paṭai*) that stand behind Padaiyappa':
bottom – 'I have the people's influence' (line 7 of transcript); The top image is
from the opening song of *Padaiyappa* (1999), poetically prefigured as the
"trailer" to the pre-climax ('Did you see Padaiyappa's army [*paṭai*]?') in the
bottom image.

Providing the "trailer" for the film's pre-climax—itself a "trailer" for Raj-
ini's implied descent into offscreen electoral politics (that is, the "main
picture")—in the opening song of the film, and then in pre-climax, Rajini
points at they who are behind, in, and all around his image. By gesturing
behind himself while facing the camera, Rajini points at the people to who
substantialized his body and soul and to whom he has given over both (re-
call the lines from the opening song, 'I was lovingly raised by Tamil Nadu
soil' and 'Is it not right for me to sacrifice body and soul to the cause of the
Tamil language and people?'), that is, to the audience before him and at
whom he gazes, who—both in this song and in the pre-climax scene—are
invited to join Rajini and become part of his spectral, yet substantial being.

The audience, then, like Rajini, stands on both sides of the screen, in
front and behind Rajini, even as he in turn encompasses them by standing

between 'the people' onscreen and the people/audience offscreen. This passing through and standing across the screen, as transduced through the poetics of Rajini's multimodal acts, is an incorporation into the mass hero's body, a body politic that faces outwards *to* and *for* us in the transformative mirror of the cinema. Here Rajini's onscreen/offscreen presence eucharistically entangles, encompasses, and incorporates the audience (cf. Silverstein 2004:626–627), even as his audience contains him as their adopted son, brother, lover, husband, leader, god.

Participants		
Protagonist/antagonist	'I', Padaiyappa (read: Rajinikanth)	'You', Neelambari (read: Jayalalitha) and her brother, Suryaprakash
'Influence' and 'power' of pro/antagonist	… has the (subaltern) people's influence. … lives by the people's power.	… have (elite) political influence. … live by the police's power.
	'this power' = 'Padaiyappa's army' (*paṭai*)	'your power' = 'nothing'
Spatial locations (see gesture row below)	'The people' are behind Padaiyappa	Neelambari et al. are in front of Padaiyappa
Kin relationality (to Padaiyappa)	Includes patrilineal kin	Affinal kin
Actions		
Verbal, non-verbal	Speaking, gesturing	Listening/silent, still
Gestures by Padaiyappa	Pointing (behind) at 'the people' with thumb(s)	Pointing (in front) at Neelambari et al. with index finger of extended left arm
Sound effects	Swoosh sound effect with gestures	No swoosh sound effect with gestures
Shot structure		
… main shot$_1$ | cutaway | main shot$_2$…		
Framing and mis-en-scène	Main shot$_{1,2}$: facing Padaiyappa (center-left) and the large crowd behind him; Neelambari, brother, police inspector, nephew, and one other are visible from behind on left and right of frame.	Cutaway: reaction shot of Neelambari's face
Shot type	Main shot$_1$: Three-fourth shot to medium-long shot (zoom-out); Main shot$_2$: medium-long shot (steady)	Close-up cutaway of Neelambari's face (short zoom-in)
Shot length	Long single takes: main shot$_1$ = 8.4 seconds [Figure 15]; main shot$_2$ = 14.4 seconds	Very short shot = 0.7 seconds

Table 1. Some poetic contrasts in *Padaiyappa*'s (1999) preclimax scene

Who/What is Praising Whom?

Bernard Bate (2009) suggested that in political oratory, the semantic trope of *ākupeyar* is deployed to create a hierarchical intimacy, a space of traffic between follower and leader, praiser and praised, where through the act of adulation grace, good favor, and material benefit might be wrought. It is this figuration of hierarchy and intimacy that Bate saw as a model of patronage and political power, and thus as the aesthetic and infrastructural basis of democratic political action in contemporary Tamil Nadu. But if Rajini's films adulate and praise Rajini, who or what is doing the praising?

This question is complicated, of course, because of the highly reticulated participation framework (Goffman 1981) of cinema: namely, that lyrics are penned by lyricists, songs sung by playback singers and written by a music director, the dialogues penned by screenwriters, the film directed by a director, choreographed by a fight or dance master, produced by a producer, characters' lines animated by actors, and so on. Who or what is praising Rajini, then? The director? Producer? Writers? Technicians? Other actors? The characters in the film, including Rajini's character? The implied spectator, the audience? The camera? The film text? Rajini himself? Some combination? These, of course, are empirical questions, both as to what the production format of any shot, scene, or line might be and as to how audiences (and filmmakers and actors) make sense of such image-acts on the screen.[21]

We might follow Madhav Prasad (2014), though, and note a tendency within mass-hero films; that *to the extent* that such films and their film-making, reception, and political economy orbit around the mass of the hero, bent to his desires, demands, and image (or at least, as refracted through fan imaginaries), then such films will tend to figurate its makers, its actors, and its characters as by-degrees fans/followers of the hero-star/leader (*talaivar*). Sidekicks, heroines, friends, family members, bystanders/extras, even enemies—such character-functions are defined not simply by their narrative roles, but also as admiring, praising fans of the hero and star actor. Further, as my own ethnographic research indicates, this fan relationality to the celebrity hero-star is also not uncommon for co-stars, directors, and technicians (Nakassis n.d.), as is reflected in director Suresh Krissna's memoir of his time directing Rajinikanth for a number of his 1990s megahits, where he commonly frames his filmmaking practice *not* as that of an author-director but a Rajinikanth fan (see Krissna and

Rangarajan 2012:32, 81, 88, 177). And as Naren noted above, there is also a sense that such films are seen by fans (and filmmakers) as made *for* them, as surrogate acts enacted on their behalf, expressing their admiration of their star and so that they may praise and adulate him (and perhaps, thus, themselves) (Srinivas 2009). As we saw, the performative effect is both to enable the hero-star to step out of the screen *and* to allow the audience to step into it, and thus into his body politic, a two-way traffic that mirrors the reversible relation of contained and container, metonymy and encompassment. But if so, then we might conclude that in the orbit of the mass hero, every position in the film's participant framework (author, animator, principal, bystander, spectator/camera/project, audience, etc.) is figured as a fan relation, as part of a composite, distributed act of praise, whose epicenter is its object, always and ever the hero-star-leader.

Notes

1 I use the following abbreviations for interlinear glosses: 2pl = second-person plural; 3s = third-person singular; ABL. = ablative case; ACC. = accusative case; AVP. = adverbial participle; CL. = clitic (-*um*), 'even'; COM. = comparative (archaic); COMPL. = completive aspectual verb (*viṭu*); DAT. = dative cass; EMPH. = emphatic; GEN. = genitive; (-)HON. = (non-)honorific form; IMP. = imperative; INCL. = inclusive first-person plural pronoun; INF. = infinitive form of verb; NEG.IMP.pl = negative imperative plural; NEUT. = neuter; OBL. = oblique pronominal form (genitive); PRES. = present tense; PST. = past tense; VOC. = vocative. Tamil is italicized and transliterated according to a slightly-modified version of the Madras Lexicon (with the exception of commonly transliterated terms, e.g., actors' names, song titles, film titles); English terms used in Tamil are unitalicized (see Nakassis 2016a, xliii–xvliii). Significant pauses in speech are indicated by the number of seconds in parentheses (#); .hh indicates a marked in-breath; x:: indicates an elongated vowel. In transcripts, gesture and other paralanguage are in <angular brackets>; RH = right hand, LH = left hand, R = right, L = left.

2 While Bate focuses on *ākupeyar,* his discussion also also implicates *anmoḻittokai,* a notionally related trope where some grammatical element of a larger noun phrase is deleted (e.g., a personal ending), leaving the modifying element to denote the whole. For example,

veḷḷāṭaiyavaḷ	*vantāḷ*	→	*veḷḷāṭai*	*vantāḷ*
white dress-woman	come-PST.SING.FEM		white-dress	come-PST.SING.FEM
'The woman-in-white-dress came.'			'White-dress came.'	
(to mean, 'the widow came')				

Ākupeyar involves no such deletion (the noun remains the same across its default and tropic usage). In *anmoḻittokai,* by contrast, agreement is determined by the full nominal form, rather than its reduced form (viz. *veḷḷāṭai vantatu* 'white-dress came[NEUT.]'). I thank E. Annamalai for drawing this distinction to my attention.

3 As A. K. Ramanujan (1985, 1999) suggested, Sangam poetry turned on a series of correspondences organized around distinct landscape (*tinai*)—or chronotopes (Bakhtin 1986)—each with its own region, times, types of persons, natural features and flora and fauna, moods, and relationships. Such tight correspondences provided a poetic language such that to evoke any one element was to evoke the chronotope as a whole. There is a "dwelling inside" or *uḷḷurai* among such elements, he argued, where each is less a representation of the others (qua metaphor) than a part of a totality that each such element manifests and contains.

4 Bate (2009:105–107), for example, argues in his discussion of *aumaiyākupeyar* (or 'simile') that metaphor in the *Nannūl* is reduced back to relations of contiguity, so that, in effect, metaphor is a subclass of the contiguity tropes of *ākupeyar*. This, he suggests, provides a challenge to any study of rhetoric that presumes Western categories or classifications as universal analytics.

5 In the section quoted, Ramanujan is arguing for a tendency within "Indian (poetic) thought" toward the context-dependent, a culturalist take that Barney seemed ambivalent about (see Bate 2009:98, 117). For me, whatever we think of such characterizations (viz. "Tamil" or "Indian" ways of thinking), of interest is the poetic-political resonance across domains—literature, political oratory, cinema—that are the *outcome* of purposive semiotic processes that link event to event, genre to genre, then to now, them to us, and so on, that is, as citational interdiscursivities that link situated practices to each other across time and space. To posit this does not require us to subscribe to a culturalist position.

6 On Rajinikanth's birthday on December 12, 2007, for example, I spent the afternoon and evening with the Vilakkuthoon fan club in Madurai. We drove to a number of different neighborhoods to attend local fan-club events where fan-club leaders at various tiers of the organizational hierarchy made speeches praising their *Talaivar* ('leader') Rajinikanth in a form and with an aesthetics comparable to political party events (though of a smaller scale). (My presence itself was taken as a kind of praise, as showing the international reach of Rajinikanth and I was, as I was often, recruited to give a speech to praise Rajinikanth.) Film music blasted, shawls were exchanged, pens and notebooks distributed to poor school children. As we drove through the streets in a small procession of several vehicles, we waved flags (of the political party they hoped Rajini would start) and yelled call-and-response chants. In these chants (and later in conversation with me), these thirty and forty-something year-old men likened Rajinikanth to their mother, father, older brother, husband, friend, god, family deity, and above all, their leader.

7 Such allusions to Rajini's offscreen religiosity (as devotee), and perhaps to his divinity (as sovereign), are typical of his films in this period, whose titles (themselves the hero's name) and narratives reference particular deities (e.g., *Annamalai, Arunachalam, Padaiyappa, Baba*; see Chakravarthy 2002:233). See discussion in main text below.

8 https://youtu.be/O1Iq4eE4nR0?t=2h18m27s, last accessed May 27, 2017.

9 *Padaiyappa* released on April 10, 1999, running for 202 days in select theaters (the last such film to pass 200 days until 2007's *Paruthiveeran*), and over one hundred days in 86

towns (Anandan 2004:28-397). It broke all previous box-office collection records in Tamil cinema at the time (Dhananjayan 2011, 206).

10 This extends to the frequent pattern of naming of Rajini's film after his hero-character (e.g., *Pandiyan, Annamalai, Muthu, Arunachalam, Baashaa, Padaiyappa, Baba, Sivaji, Lingaa, Kabali*). Exceptions to this are telling. It is reported that *Padaiyappa* (1999) was originally to be named *Neelambari* after the villainess, Ramya Krishnan's character. The idea was scrapped, however, for fear of the "backlash from fans" (Reddy 2013). Similarly, Rajini's comeback film after *Baba* (2002), *Chandiramukhi* (2005)—which broke in certain ways from the Rajini formula—is named after a female character in the film. One popular biography of Rajinikanth notes: "Rajini's fans were angry and upset. They were bugged with director Vasu for daring to title the film after a woman despite Thalaivar's presence. Only Vasu's repeated promises that the movie would have the superstar back to where he belonged served as a balming effect" (Sreekanth 2008, 200–201).

11 The hovering, virtual presence of Rajinikanth's transtextual persona is not just a framing paratext of the film, however, but is also continually reiterated within the film and its diegetic worlds, as when, for example, Rajini's characters are referenced by the names of his previous roles or simply by his proper name or epithet. See Nakassis 2016a, 208–209.

12 Besides the question of narrative coherence, the long pre-Rajini introductory sequence is partly motivated by Sivaji Ganesan's seniority and status in the industry (note that in the running of the credits over the introductory scenes Sivaji gets first billing over Rajinikanth, even if the film has already been announced as a Rajini film by his title-credit sequence). Ramya Krishna/Neelambari's introduction is more complex. We can note that her introduction itself has a number of "build ups" that figurate her as an important actress/character, in ways that mirror the hero's introduction (including performing one of Rajini's signature *style*s with sunglasses), as do side-characters' later typifications of her as *bantā* ('show offy') and *style* (if gendered in telling ways). Her introduction before Rajini serves to stage a first iteration of their confrontation and competition (which is the backbone of the narrative plot and its political allegory). This both acts to delay Rajini's entry (and increase our expectation) but also to build up the audience's sense of Neelambari's arrogance and villainy (as the structural inversion of Rajini's heroism). This is consonant with K. S. Ravikumar's original intent to name the film *Neelambari*, after the villainness, rather than *Padaiyappa*, after the hero (see footnote 10 above).

13 Rajinikanth's films of this period often feature scenes with snakes, thought to be a kind of good-luck charm and a signature element of his star image (Chakravarthy 2002).

14 For reasons of space, I simplify the structure of this scene; many more themes are relevant here, including gender stereotypes between the two female characters and the interpersonal dynamics between them as mediated by Rajini/Padaiyappa.

15 Joyojeet Pal (personal communication, October 29, 2016) reports from his research with Rajinikanth fans for the documentary *For the Love of a Man* (Kalsy and Pal 2015) that fans in the 1980s would force the projectionist to freeze the frame of the first appearance of Rajini's face so as to perform *tiruṣṭi* ('evil eye') rituals on the image. Only after this would the film continue rolling, and the narrative begin/continue. Pal suggested that this practice became incorporated into later Rajini films such as freeze-frame shots.

16 To take a more recent example, consider Rajini's film *Lingaa* (directed by K. S. Ravikumar), which released on December 12, 2014, Rajini's 64th birthday. The film features a flashback scene where a cake is wheeled out to celebrate the birthday of one

of the two characters that Rajini plays, offering the audience a moment to celebrate Rajinikanth's birthday with him, in his "vicinity," as one English-language reviewer, Baradwaj Rangan (2014) put it. A disappointed Rangan notes: "Oh, there was one other scene that ushered in much excitement. It's when we learn it's the birthday of the Rajinikanth character in the flashback. A cake is wheeled out. People sing the birthday song. Fans watching Lingaa on its day of release, December 12 (Rajinikanth's birthday), will enjoy being in the superstar's vicinity as he cuts his birthday cake. But that's just a temporary high. Next time, how about a film that leaves us with happy memories on other days as well?"

17 So different from our classical understanding of representation—namely, that the sign is not its Object—this understanding of the cinematic sign is often framed in academic accounts—and in the accounts by fans themselves, as with Vivek and Naren above (also see Kalsy and Pal 2015)—by appeal to the Hindu notion of *darśan* (Eck 1997; Jacob 2009; cf. Taylor 2003; Ram 2008:55–56; Nakassis 2016a, 271, n. 4), that tactile visual modality through which devotees and deity transact substance, where the idol-sign *is* its Divine Object (cf. Armstrong 1971, 1981; Belting [1990] 1994; Leone and Parmentier 2014). Whether we hold that such a modality of vision is fundamentally religious in nature or that the religious and the cinematic here share a convergent semiotic ideology and phenomenology (to say nothing of participation framework), what I would underscore is that such images are less something to be seen as such (at least, as we typically understand vision) than they are figurations of, and thus in certain contexts are, haptic forces that entangle and encompass, reach out to grab and act on who and what is seen (cf. Davis 1999; Pinney 2002; Jain 2007; Shulman 2012:51–53).

18 Rajini's onscreen allusions—for example, in films like *Annamalai* (1992), *Muthu* (1995), *Arunachalam* (1997), and *Padaiyappa* (1999)—were mirrored by Rajini's own offscreen political comments (famously saying in 1996, e.g., "Even God cannot save Tamil Nadu if AIADMK returns to power") and his public campaigning in support of the anti-AIADMK alliance (which won the 1996 elections in a landslide because, it is often opined, of Rajini's support). Ultimately, however, to the dismay of his fans, Rajinikanth did not enter into electoral politics (on this, see Kurai 2012 and Rajanayagam 2015), nor has he since, deferring the possibility to some vague future or the will of the divine. Three years after *Padaiyappa*, Rajini released his next film, *Baba* (2002), a politically equivocal film and a shocking box-office failure. Since then, Rajini has only off and on made reference to entering electoral politics, just as his films have less explicitly served as, and been read as, intimations to his political plans.

19 Onset of gesture in the center column syncs with the dialogue and pauses in the left column. English glosses of the equivalent Tamil lines are in the right column.

20 Rajini/Padaiyappa here says, in Tamil, "*jujubi.*" This is a colloquial way to typify something as trivial or unsubstantial; it is also, interestingly, the English term for *ziziphus jujuba* ("jujube," or the "Indian date"; in Tamil, *ilantai paḻam*), though only one Tamil person I spoke to about this term made this connection.

21 See Dickey 1993b, Nakassis n.d., 2014, 2016b for examples on how these logics can be variously configured in the Tamil film case, with animators taken as principals, and directors obviated from blame for what their actors do.

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